

BECOMINGS IN J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE
BARBARIANS* AND JOSÉ SARAMAGO'S *BLINDNESS*

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A bestial life is turning me into a beast.

Há muitas maneiras de tornar-se animal.
[There are many ways of becoming an animal.]

Introduction

In the first epigraph, the magistrate from J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is describing his condition following his arrest and fall from grace, and in the second, the blind doctor from José Saramago's novel *Blindness* is commenting on the state to which he has deteriorated. Coetzee's novel portrays an official's fall from power, while Saramago's illustrates how, once blind, the eye doctor cannot live up to his profession or status in society and slides along with the other blind inmates at the asylum into a form that is closer to an animal than a human being. Fall from power or a change in status paves the way to the process of "becoming-animal" in both novels. This term is employed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. The reader may wonder what the link between both epigraphs is and how they can be interpreted by the Deleuzian and Guattarian concept of "becoming-animal." In a Deleuzian and Guattarian becoming, an association with an anomalous entity compels an individual to leave their "pack." In both novels, the barbarian girl and the thief can be considered the anomalous entities that force the magistrate

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and blind doctor out. Customarily, following a becoming, a threshold is irrevocably crossed, resulting in undefined boundaries. Moreover, as a “becoming” challenges an existing order, the individual is ostracized. Unable to return to the pack, the becoming prompts a fall to a minoritarian.

Examples of becomings abound in literature of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* being one of the most prominent. In this novella, the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, awakens to find himself transformed into a giant insect; at first his metamorphosis arouses his family’s curiosity, but he becomes a burden, and then he is neglected. This kind of transformation, which is incomprehensible, places the person on the fringes of a culture he or she was once a part of, puts him or her in a position akin to that of the subaltern. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Blindness*, the magistrate and the doctor cross the threshold after a fall from grace: the magistrate has lost his role as a once-powerful official of the empire, while the doctor has been deprived of his profession and status in society and is only allowed to exist, along with the other inmates, as a blind person. Deleuze and Guattari, however, suggest that at times, a becoming can function as a source of creativity, a possibility for a new beginning. In this paper, I propose to show that although becoming in both novels serves as a source of creativity, it also has negative connotations. This is particularly true in *Blindness*, in which the becoming results in a fall to a degraded existence usually relegated to animals by humans. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this process is likewise invariably one of degradation, an irreversible flow of movement in which one is transformed from a majoritarian into a minoritarian.

Becoming-animal, Becoming-woman: Waiting for the Barbarians

Coetzee, the South African-born 2003 Nobel Laureate and two-time Booker Prize winner, published *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980. The novel is set in an undefined time in an outpost of an unidentifiable empire that is controlled by a magistrate who aspires to spend the rest of his days without any confrontation. The magistrate reflects on his situation: “I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire.”¹ He “did not mean to get embroiled” in the events that transpire in the novel; the empire, however, had other plans (8). The arrival of Colonel Joll forces the magistrate to get engrossed in an alleged barbarian insurgency, which leads to his involvement with one of the barbarian girls. The opening page of the novel introduces the reader

to Colonel Joll, who has come to investigate the alleged riot. Colonel Joll epitomizes the worst that colonization has to offer and at the very beginning of the novel shows how much he enjoys carrying out torture on animals and on those whom he considers as such or those he regards as not fully human. To him, the barbarians are animals in human form. This point is discussed in depth in Giorgio Agamben's book, *Open: Man and Animal*. Agamben argues that "the anthropological machine of the moderns" functions

by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human[,] . . . that is, the animal separated within the human body itself. If, in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* or *Homo ferus*, but also and above all the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of an animal in human form.²

As slaves, barbarians are considered exterior to "man"; they are inherently animals even if their form suggests otherwise. This warrants their being treated the same as animals or beings perceived as such are often treated. Colonel Joll proudly describes to the magistrate how on an earlier hunting trip "thousands of deer, pigs, bears were slain, so many that a mountain of carcasses had to be left to rot," as if he revels in this killing escapade (1). This sets the stage for the later cruelty we witness against the local population. Colonel Joll undertakes one of these episodes of torture himself:

The Colonel steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust into his naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. I read the words upside down: ENEMY . . . ENEMY . . . ENEMY . . . ENEMY. He steps back and folds his hands.

. . .

Then the beating begins. The soldiers use the stout green cane staves, bringing them down with the heavy slapping sounds of washing-paddles.

. . .

The black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood. The game, I see, is to beat them till their backs are washed clean. (115)

The magistrate, on the other hand, strives to show a more humane face, as when he interrogates one of the barbarian boys:

“Listen,” I say. “They tell me you have made a confession. They say you have admitted that you and the old man and other men from your clan have stolen sheep and horses. You have said that the men of your clan are arming themselves, that in the spring you are all going to join in a great war on the Empire. Are you telling the truth? Do you understand what this confession of yours will mean? Do you understand?”(11)

Coetzee thus depicts the various faces of the torturer, which according to Susan Van Zanten Gallagher, points to the problem Coetzee explores of how to represent a torturer.³ This is suggested in the magistrate’s reflection when he ponders how Colonel Joll must feel following an episode of torture and wonders whether “he has a private ritual of purification” (13). In an earlier essay, “Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa,” Coetzee also questions the ethicality of an author’s documenting such practices. This issue resurfaces in *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, in which Elizabeth states that to remain silent about violence is the only way to let it die, to not give it a chance to be reborn; furthermore, writing about it is in itself obscene.⁴

The method of interrogation favored by Colonel contrasts, as I have noted, with that of the magistrate:

I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth. (5)

Colonel Joll presumes that all barbarian utterances amount to untruth. Some critics, such as Rosemary Jane Jolly, however, suggest that the colonel and the magistrate share similar attitudes. In her study on Coetzee’s work, Jolly notes that “there is one aspect of his ‘reading’ of the barbarian ‘girl’ that corresponds to Joll’s ‘writing’ and ‘reading’ of her. By making her body into a sign that becomes the figure of the truth, both Joll and the magistrate turn the ‘girl’ into an other whose person, outside of that figuring, is irrelevant to them.”⁵ But the magistrate’s and Colonel Joll’s attitudes are not identical. Joll completely rejects the other, while the magistrate attempts to understand the subaltern. In what initially appears to be an act of pity, the magistrate

becomes involved with the barbarian girl, who has been maimed and partially blinded by her torturers and whose father has been tortured to death by Joll's men. Nonetheless, his sympathy is selective; he emphatically tells us, for example, that he chooses not to hear the screams from the granary (9). In some respects, the magistrate and Colonel Joll can be seen as two sides of the same coin, the cruel and benevolent colonizer. The magistrate aptly describes the situation: "I cannot pretend to be any better than a mother comforting a child between his father's spells of wrath. It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive" (8).

In his introduction to Albert Memmi's book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Jean-Paul Sartre observes that "there are neither good nor bad colonists: there are colonialists," a point of view that undermines the magistrate's depiction of himself as the good colonialist.⁶ Even though the magistrate begins to question certain practices of the colonial power, he does not oppose a system that is based on colonialism. After all, he has benefitted from being part of the system; he tries to give colonialism a human face, to set himself apart from the likes of Colonel Joll. However, Sartre emphasizes that no matter how humane a colonialist is, a colonialist is still part of an oppressive system.

Playing the role of the sympathetic colonizer, the magistrate takes it on himself to deliver the barbarian girl to her people, an action that propels him into a process of deterritorialization resulting in a change in his state. However, the peculiar relationship that evolves between the magistrate and the barbarian girl forces on him the development of a certain character and understanding. He becomes sympathetic to a presence that is outside the confines of the empire. The barbarian girl challenges his beliefs and is the creative force behind his becoming. The decision he makes forces him to move outside the territory defined by the state. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things."⁷ The magistrate does not regard his accompanying the girl to her people as a particularly significant act, but the empire does. Already at the fringes of the empire, at a "lazy frontier," the magistrate leaves the *socius*, defined by the boundaries set by the state, to a periphery (8). This act impels a "becoming." Once he has defied the rules of the empire he is accused of treason and treated like the native other. Rebecca Saunders considers that in "departing from the tranquil familiarity of his interpretive community," the magistrate enters "an apparently permanent exile."⁸ The magistrate's action not only renders him an exile but also strips him of status in the eyes of the empire he has so far served well. An

external or supernatural element typically plays a part in “becoming-animal.” This is also evident in *Blindness*, in which the epidemic of white blindness, although unexplainable, brings about a becoming that necessitates a force of creative survival.

Deleuze and Guattari state that “a becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, peopling, in short, a multiplicity” and that “we do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity” (264). The magistrate becomes fascinated by the barbarian girl, prompting him to leave his pack. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a becoming, which results from an encounter with the other, requires a reshaping, an act of creativity. The encounter with the barbarian girl compels a reshaping of the magistrate’s relationship with the other, even though the barbarian girl is the only other with whom the magistrate interacts (in contrast, in *Blindness*, the becoming involves a restructuring of a whole society). The magistrate feels that he needs to decipher the scars on the barbarian girl’s body to understand her more; he has hoped that taking her to her people would unravel more of the mystery of that other, of “the traces of a history her body bears” (70). But the girl remains as undecipherable as the collection of characters over which he obsesses (121).

From the empire’s perspective, the magistrate’s action not only warrants punishment but also ostracism. Following his exploit, he is imprisoned and tortured. He reflects on his confinement:

Nevertheless, I am not taking easily to the humiliations of imprisonment. Sometimes, . . . finding as I pace the room that I am counting *one-two-three-four-five-six-one-two-three* . . ., or brushing my hand mindlessly over my face, I realize how tiny I have allowed them to make my world, how I daily become more like a beast or a simple machine. . . . Then I respond with movements of vertiginous terror in which I rush around the cell jerking my arms about, pulling my beard, stamping my feet. (92–93)

Any form of imprisonment or confinement will yield a certain degree of transformation; in this case, it assists in the process of “becoming animal.” When the authorities confine the once-free citizens to the asylum in Saramago’s novel, this conversion manifests itself more soundly. Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari state “becomings are minoritarian; all becoming is a becoming-minoritarian” (320). Essentially, to Deleuze and Guattari, “man is majoritarian par excellence” (320). The dominant/majoritarian is always

the adult white male, and deviation from what is expected of adult white males results in a “becoming-minoritarian.” By electing to leave his “pack,” the magistrate, in spite of himself and because of the confrontation with the other, undergoes a “becoming-minoritarian.” Reversal of such a process is not possible. In *Blindness*, the encounter with white blindness creates a reality in which people are forced to live a bestial existence in a wholly different world that compels its inhabitants to engage in a new kind of interaction and to take up a new kind of learning and a new kind of communal living. This new existence with which they have to contend is similar to the new reality the magistrate has to confront. The magistrate, who still thinks of himself as the person-in-charge of his outpost, is made to see how he is now perceived by others through the words of the colonel, who cruelly probes him in his cell:

But let me ask you: do you believe that that is how your fellow-citizens see you after the ridiculous spectacle you created on the square the other day? Believe me, to people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman. You are dirty, you stink, they can smell you a mile away. (124)

“Becoming-animal” does not make a person an animal (although Deleuze and Guattari note that “[bestialism] may arise” [307]), since the reality “resides not in an animal one imitates or to which one corresponds but in [oneself]”; in this case, the “becoming” is strictly a matter of deterritorialization (307). The “becoming-beast” of the magistrate is brought about in Deleuzian and Guattarian terms by his movement from the center of the *socius*, the confines defined by the empire, to the periphery, to the limits of what is deemed acceptable by the empire. Once the boundaries become blurred, the process of “becoming-animal” takes the magistrate further away from the center. His confrontation with the other has imposed a becoming.

Following the process of deterritorialization, the magistrate is subjected to another form of “becoming,” “becoming-woman.” According to Deleuze and Guattari, since becomings are always minoritarian, they “always pass through a becoming-woman,” man being a “majoritarian par excellence” (321, 320). Systems based on patriarchal hierarchies such as colonialism or dictatorships regard women as lesser beings. Hence, an essential component of dehumanizing the magistrate is his metaphoric transformation into a woman. By dressing as a woman, the magistrate confronts another reality of himself; and in the eyes of his torturers, this metaphorical reality allows a process of

becoming a minoritarian and woman. The magistrate describes the enactment of the symbolic act that has forced the “becoming-woman” on him:

Then one day they throw open the door and I step out to face not the two men but a squad standing to attention. “Here,” says Mandel, and hands me a woman’s calico smock. “Put it on.”

...

I slip the smock over my head. It reaches halfway down my thighs. I catch a glimpse of the two youngest maids ducking back into the kitchen, dissolving in giggles. My wrists are caught behind my back and tied. “The time has come, Magistrate,” Mandel whispers in my ear. “Do your best to behave like a man.” (128)

Forcing him to wear a dress is an attempt to demean the magistrate, as to the empire a woman is, a priori, a minoritarian. The act confirms the state of “becoming” and completes the deterritorialization of the magistrate. He can neither become the woman nor return to his role as magistrate. In her essay on Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, Elleke Boehmer states that “white dominance and the overcoming of white dominance are both figured as involving the subjection of the female body, as part of a long history of female exploitation.”⁹ Symbolically turning the magistrate into a woman allows the empire to exploit him without any remorse, to subjugate him to any form of torture. Women in captivity in abusive cultures are often labeled prostitutes, further humiliating them and allowing the torturers further indulgences. In her *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog provides testimonies of ex-female captives that demonstrate how the torture of women has always been more violent than that of their male counterparts:

And when whatever you stood for was reduced to prostitution, unpaid prostitution, the licence for sexual abuse was created. Then things happened that could not happen to a man. Your sexuality was used to strip away your dignity, to undermine your sense of self. . . . It is only when men in prisons are forced by sodomy to behave like women that they realize how it is to live with a constant awareness of your body and how it can be abused and ridiculed. Mthintso says a man who didn’t break under torture was respected by police. . . . But a woman’s refusal to bow down would unleash the wrath of torturers.¹⁰

Furthermore, Caroline Rooney suggests that “torture deprives the other of truth in reducing awareness to the extreme sensations of body.”¹¹ This form

of reduction enhances the animal within; in this case, the “becoming-woman” is equivalent to “becoming-animal.” To become-man again, Mandel tells the magistrate he has to appear to behave like one. Being made to wear the dress undermines the process. Ridiculing the magistrate and transforming him into a spectacle—the faces “pressed against the bars of the gate gap[e] at the spectacle of the fall of the once mighty” (87)—also makes “becoming-man” again improbable. He has already been marked as a lesser being, for “no one greets” him (87). His only means of escaping his torment is literally to accept the degradation and “become-animal,” just “like a dog in a corner” (128). He cannot return to the pack or to being a majoritarian. Earlier, the magistrate describes the instigation that forced a “becoming-dog” on him. He reflects: “Truly, man was not made to live alone! I build my day unreasonably around the hours when I am fed. I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast” (87). The bestial life is manifested in his confinement to a windowless cell with a “hole high on the wall” (86). It is worth noting that for Coetzee the worst state of degradation for a human being is to be relegated to the ranks of animals. It is not that Coetzee considers animals to be of a lesser standing. Coetzee aspires to a time when human beings will “have a dignity that sets them apart from animals and consequently protect them from being treated like animals”; and “when animals will have their own dignity ascribed to them, and the ban will be reformulated as a ban on treating a living creature like a thing.”¹² In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee explores the issue of cruelty against animals in depth. Humans not only have given themselves the right to treat animals badly; even when sympathetic to the plight of animals, they also are or pretend to be blind to certain issues such as the experimentation that is inflicted regularly on animals. The position to which humans through their egotism and maltreatment have reduced animals makes the comparison of a human life to that of an animal degrading.

In both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Blindness*, a certain connection is established between awareness/blindness and the process of “becoming.” The opening lines of Coetzee’s novel introduce us to the dark spectacles that hide Colonel Joll’s eyes. The magistrate describes the scene to us: “I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind” (1). Gallagher emphasizes that the vision they both lack is moral.¹³ The theme of blindness is alluded to from the very beginning. To Dick Penner, “Joll is ethically blind, as is the empire that he represents; in the capital, he tells the magistrate, everyone wears such glasses.”¹⁴ And, as with the empire he represents, Colonel Joll does not undergo any form of becoming or transformation; he remains as

ethically blind as the empire he is proud to serve. The magistrate stares through the window “at the faint blur against the blackness that is Colonel Joll” (160). Toward the end of the novel, even though the dark lenses are gone, the darkness within remains deeply instilled; within “is just this dark howling abyss.”¹⁵ On the other hand, in *Blindness*, the white blindness brings with it a stripping of humanity to its bare essence; animal behavior rises to the fore. In contrast, following the process of “becoming-animal,” the magistrate regains a degree of awareness; he understands how the crime they have committed on others will come back to haunt them. He mouths these words at Colonel Joll: “The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves. . . . Not on others” (160). In other words, the darkness within the self should undergo a transformation rather than being exteriorized and imposed on the other.

One of the unbearable crimes long inflicted on the other is a form of blinding. The barbarian girl tells the magistrate: “They did not burn” her (44). “They said they would burn” her “eyes out. . . . The man brought” the fork “and made” her “look at it. They held” her “eyelids open,” but she “had nothing to tell them” (44). Although she is left partially blind from this act, she exhibits more awareness than the seeing magistrate and Joll combined; as a subaltern—who always being confronted with realities that are at once foreign and changing that enhances the subaltern’s sense of awareness—she fully comprehends what it is like to be the other. During the same episode of torture, and when the magistrate examines the corpse of an old man tortured by Joll’s men, he finds that “the lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole” (7). Rooney sees in this inflicted blindness a loss of both the eye and I.¹⁶ Even the magistrate has never been able to truly see the barbarian girl, as he always looked through her.¹⁷ In his dreams, she is always eclipsed. It is only in his cell when he shuts his eyes that he can attune his hearing “to that infinitely faint level at which the cries of all who suffered here must still beat from wall to wall” (87). Prior to the torture episode and the process of “becoming-animal,” the magistrate never heard the cries from the granary. It is his “becoming-minoritarian” that magistrate becomes receptive to the existence and suffering of others.

Becoming-blind, Becoming-animal: Blindness

José Saramago, a Nobel Laureate Portuguese writer, first published *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* in 1995; the English translation, *Blindness*, came out in 1997.

In Saramago's novel, a whole community gradually succumbs to a bizarre form of blindness, which forces them to "veja tudo branco" ["see everything white"].¹⁸ This inexplicable malady transpires suddenly, plaguing most of the city. The first incident of blindness occurs at the traffic light, when as the light changes from amber to green, a man goes blind. Then, a short time later the man who helps the man home but also steals his car suddenly goes blind, as does the ophthalmologist who the man goes to see and his other patients, the blindness spreading like an epidemic. Carlos Veloso remarks how the "affliction does not discriminate between male and female, young and old, sick and healthy, rich and poor."¹⁹ The events that transpire introduce the reader to yet another manifestation of the concept of "becoming-animal" in literature. In this novel, "becoming-blind" functions in the same way as the Deleuzian and Guattarian "becoming-animal." Here, "becoming-blind," challenges, just as "becoming-animal" does, the preexisting order of society. It is a collective movement from majoritarian to minoritarian par excellence. As the disease is both infectious and mysterious, the government authorities, out of fear, decide to transport those infected as soon as they become blind into an asylum, allegedly as means of quarantining them. The one unifying feature of the asylum's inmates is blindness and, according to an authority that has already labeled them as beasts, it is their blindness that warrants their relocation, their being herded off like sheep:

Agora ouviam-se ruídos confusos no átrio, eram os cegos, trazidos em rebanho, que esbarravam uns nos outros, comprimiam-se no vão das portas, uns poucos perderam o sentido e foram parar a outras camaratas, mas a maioria, aos tropeções, agarrados em cachos ou disparados um a um, agitando afeitivamente as mãos em jeito de quem está a afogar-se. (72–73)

[A confusion of sounds was coming from the hallway, these were the blind, driven like sheep, bumping into each other, crammed together in the doorways, some lost their sense of direction and ended up in other wards, but the majority, stumbling along, huddled into groups or dispersed one by one, desperately waving their hands in the air like people drowning. (64)]

The epidemic strictly forces deterritorialization on the inhabitants of the town, who are forcibly moved from their known locales and reorganized into new packs based on their state of blindness or sightedness. The ophthalmologist's wife who does not become infected by the mysterious malady

and retains her eyesight nevertheless chooses to accompany her husband to the asylum, where she becomes the leader of the pack. Through her eyes, we see the events that unfold in the asylum of the blind. Deleuze and Guattari state that to become other, one has to approximate patterns of movement of that other. In this new reality imposed on the asylum inhabitants, the patterns of behavior that evolve approximate what is perceived to be the actions of a blind person or behavior of the doctor's wife. The epidemic forces the inhabitants of the asylum to become creative in trying to find ways to survive. It is ironic that the task of figuring out how they are going to survive falls on the only seeing person, the doctor's wife.

The officials have chosen the asylum specifically because its design permits them to establish new boundaries and categories:

É o que apresenta melhores condições, por que, a par de estar murado em todo o seu perímetro, ainda tem a vantagem de se compor de duas alas, uma que destinaremos aos cegos propriamente ditos, outra para os suspeitos, além de um corpo central que servirá, por assim dizer, de terra-de-ninguém, por onde os que cegarem transitarão para irem juntar-se aos que já estavam cegos. (46)

[It's the place that offers the best facilities because not only does it have a perimeter wall, it also has the advantage of having two separate wings, one to be used for those who are actually blind, the other for those suspected of having the disease, as well as a central area which will serve, as it were, as a no man's land, through which those who turn blind will pass to join those who are already blind. (37)]

Individuals' state in this new pack is defined by the condition of blindness. The central area becomes the threshold one has to cross in the process of "becoming-animal." Once crossed, one is not allowed to return. In the becoming, we encounter a new beginning, a "becoming-minoritarian." The corridor separating both wings is the boundary that marks off the animal from the human, the majoritarian from the minoritarian. Another boundary is established by the soldiers guarding the blind inmates, who try to keep their distance so as not to become infected. When the injured car thief attempts to approach the guards seeking medical help for his injury, in panic a soldier fatally shoots him: "Muito devagar, no intervalo entre dois ferros verticais, como um fantasma, começou a aparecer uma cara branca. A cara de um cego. O medo fez gelar o sangue do soldado, e foi o medo

que o fez apontar a arma e disparar uma rajada à queima-roupa” (80) [“Very slowly, between two vertical iron bars, like a ghost, a white face began to appear. The face of a blind man. Fear made the soldier’s blood freeze, and fear drove him to aim his weapon and release a blast of gunfire at close range” (72)].

Following the incident, one sergeant comments that it “o melhor era deixá-los morrer à fome, morrendo o bicho acabava-se a peçonha” (89) [“would have been better to let them die of hunger, [as] when the beast dies, the poison dies with it” (80)]. To the soldiers, the blind citizens are nothing but beasts that need to be contained. They do not address them by name or title but only refer to them by their condition. When the doctor and his wife try to seek help for the injured car thief, the sergeant replies: “Olhe lá, ó ceguinho, quem lhe vai comunicar uma coisa a si sou eu, ou você e essa voltam agora mesmo para donde vieram, ou levam um tiro” (69) [“Look here, blind man, let me tell you something, either the two of you get back to where you came from, or you’ll be shot.” (60)]. The operative word here is “blind.” Saramago suggests that it’s not just the blind who are incapable of seeing but also the sighted. It is paradoxical that the army does not see the beast that is emerging from inside of it. Blindness exposes the savagery within. The soldiers refuse to confront the other out of fear of that other; like Colonel Joll in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who is also fearful of the other, the soldiers are morally blind. They remain frozen behind their weapons, incapable of any form of becoming.

In the wings, citizens from all occupations and professions confront a new form of reality, in a new community that can hardly be described as utopian, although the epidemic does force a new form of creativity on them as a group (this runs contrary to the magistrate’s becoming, in which he acts creatively only in relation to the barbarian girl, when he returns her to her people). If as per Deleuze and Guattari, “becoming-animal” involves unnatural participants, in this novel, blindness, the instigator, has brought about an unreal community of unnatural participants. Although blindness has rendered everyone’s profession useless, the characters are still referred to by the professions they once had, accentuating their facelessness. It is ironic that the characters report not plunging into darkness but instead into whiteness (in “para esta cegueira tudo é branco” [255]; “this particular blindness everything is white” [253]). Whiteness, if a sign of purity, contrasts sharply with the actions in the novel. The characters may not be plunged in darkness, but darkness nevertheless resides within each

of them. Maria Alzira Seixo suggests the blindness acquires a multitude of meanings. She states:

In fact, blindness in Saramago's novel has very little to do with not being able to see, except for pragmatic details that make the fictional construct picturesque and "realistic." Thus, for example, the central character—the doctor's wife—is the only one who never becomes blind, and for two good reasons: first, the narrator has to adopt some perspective in telling the story, and a narrative perspective is always, and also literally, a point of view; second, one cannot have an allegory if one cannot develop a reasoning, a moralistic attitude, a final judgment, and it is the doctor's wife, set apart from the entire community of the blind, who achieves the convergence of the different meanings of blindness in the text (and outside of it as well).²⁰

By allowing the doctor's wife to retain her sight, Saramago introduces a character that can bridge both worlds, blindness and seeing, make a comparison, and become the judge on both. Likewise, the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* could only become the judge of events after undergoing the process of becoming. The doctor's wife is in a position to relate what she sees to the other blind inmates and to witness the ravages inside and outside of the asylum. She assumes power simply because she is capable of seeing. However, throughout the novel the readers are reminded of her inferior status of as a woman affiliated with a man, as the narrator repeatedly refers to her as the doctor's wife. A minoritarian, the doctor's wife will never be able to become majoritarian; her "becoming-animal" is defined by her gender. But being a minoritarian has allowed the doctor's wife to be attentive to the suffering of others, a sensitivity learned by the magistrate once he becomes a minoritarian.

The emerging dystopia in the asylum and beyond renders everyone "faceless," and the once familiar society breaks apart.²¹ In some ways, the affliction depersonalizes the individuals while universalizing "the human condition."²² This epidemic of white blindness exposes the abject within. Saramago thrusts his characters in a surreal situation to see how they will perform, using the eyes of the doctor's wife. She endeavors to create a form of normalcy in the face of the animality that unfolds, but she loses her struggle to retain civilized norms when she chooses to kill one of the rapists with scissors. In her revenge, the doctor's wife resorts to the level of her oppressors; stabbing the man with scissors at once avenges the death of the insomniac woman and the rapes that the men have inflicted on the women—an eye for an eye,

the law of the jungle. Toward the end of the novel, a horrific scene presents itself, which leads the doctor's wife to describe everybody as a murderer. In her search for food, the doctor's wife descends the steps to the basement of a supermarket. Her descent, which parodies one to the underworld, reveals decomposed bodies emitting an awful stench. She suspects that they died after tripping on the stairs, having gone to search for food, and likely didn't reach their destination and that even if they did, they were unable to get back out because there was an obstruction on the stairs. She feels responsible, as the noise made by her plastic bags when she had come back on another day from the store must have alerted them to the possibility of food. She feels everything she and others "comemos é roubado à boca de outros" (298) ["eat has been stolen from the mouths of others" (297)], and if they "ihes roubamos de mais acabamos por causar-lhes a morte, no fundo somos todos mais ou menos assassinos" (298) ["rob them of too much [they] are responsible for their death, one way or another [they] are all murderers" (298)].

Because the blind are never given proper names, they refer to one another by either their profession, as in the case of the doctor, or by the action they were involved in at the time of succumbing to blindness. As the doctor's wife comments, "Também saberá que aqui não tem importância" (66) ["Names are of no importance here" (57)]. Similarly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, with exception of Colonel Joll, no one has a proper name. Jacques Derrida sees in being human the ability to name. Although speech capability has granted more power to humans over other species, a change of fortune can easily deprive them of this power, of the power to name.²³ As Sandra Kumamoto Stanley remarks, this loss of names indicates the loss of identity:

Saramago seems most interested in asking by what ethical codes do these characters live once they are ejected from their familiar environment. Referring to many of his characters by the functional roles that they can no longer fulfill—doctor, taxi driver, hotel maid, policeman—Saramago provides the reader with a diverse group of characters who lose not only their sight but also their former identities as they try to survive in the space of the negative.²⁴

As the once-known societal structure breaks apart, their former profession or status becomes irrelevant; they no longer occupy the position they once did in their "pack." Instead, new packs, new roles, and new realities have to be created. Stanley adds:

Blindness cuts across socioeconomic barriers, and the doctor, policeman, and hotel maid all find themselves in a homogenized

category: the blind. But in sweeping away the old class system and former modes of production, Saramago does not give us an idealized communal state; instead, this new state forces the inmates to return to the primitive rather than to advance to a new utopian order. And in the increasingly primitive state, the inmates systematically shed their former identities as they become defined by their corporeality.²⁵

Blindness forces a deterritorialization on them and compels them to a search for another “pack,” effectuating a “becoming-animal.” In the asylum, as human values quickly erode, new packs within the categories imposed by the authorities begin to emerge. These new packs mostly grow out of the need for basic survival; the inmates are obliged to stick together, but “each member is alone even in the company of others” (Deleuze and Guattari 37). Routine behaviors are sustained even though their lives are no longer routine. The meaninglessness of this is emphasized by the inmates being referred to by their profession or what they were doing when they went blind. Stanley adds, “This dissolution of the internal and external, of the psychological and material world, leaves the group feeling further fragmented and unanchored.”²⁶

As the novel unfolds, what ensues is a “becoming-animal” of a whole community whose societal demarcation lines have been eroded. Werner von Koppelfels sees blindness as not only transforming the city by creating new boundaries but also civilization as we know it.²⁷ The doctor remarks on their new status: “Sabia que estava sujo, sujo como não se lembrava de ter estado alguma vez na vida. Há muitas maneiras de tornar-se animal, pensou, esta é só a primeira delas” (97) [“He knew he was dirty, dirtier than he could ever remember having been in his life. There are many ways of becoming an animal, he thought, this is just the first of them” (89)]. His wife, on the other hand, resists this bestialism, asserting that “se não formos capazes de viver inteiramente como pessoas, ao menos façamos tudo para não viver inteiramente como animais” (119) [“if they cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let [us] do everything in [our] power not to live entirely like animals” (111)]. In the asylum, we witness gradual regression from the human to the animal. The marking lies in the ability to see; the soldiers on the outside consider themselves human by mere virtue of being sighted; those within the asylum have been relegated to the status of animals on account of their blindness. The soldiers refuse to be associated with the blind. Stanley remarks: “Ironically, the guards are so fearful of being infected that they refuse to associate with the blind; they gaze at the quarantined prisoners from a position not of power, but of fear.”²⁸

In some respects, the doctor's wife has been chosen and marked to witness the horror. She says no one can know "o que é ter olhos num mundo de cegos, não sou rainha, não, sou simplesmente a que nasceu para ver o horror" (262) ["what it means to have eyes in a world in which everyone else is blind, I am not a queen, no, I am simply the one who was born to see this horror" (260)]. The magistrate, on the other hand, can only witness the horror of the empire he once represented after undergoing the process of becoming-animal. But even though the doctor's wife is capable of seeing the others, their inability to reciprocate her gaze renders her another blank, or as David Frier suggests, leads to her becoming as blind as them.²⁹ She confirms this in her observation that "cada vez irei vendo menos, mesmo que não perca a vista tornar-me-ei mais e mais cega cada dia porque não terei quem me veja" (302) ["I'll see less and less all the time, even though I may not lose my eyesight I shall become more and more blind because I shall have no one to see me" (301)]. In some respects, this holds true of the magistrate—his knowledge is rendered trivial by his peers, as they have not undergone the process of becoming and therefore fail to understand the awareness he has gained. Furthermore, following his becoming, the magistrate is no longer seen as a magistrate by his subjects; not to be seen as such makes him somehow invisible. The doctor's wife considers herself to be blind with their blindness, even though she is capable of seeing (282, 281). The man with the black patch aptly describes their condition:

Regressamos à horda primitiva . . . com a diferença de que não somos uns quantos milhares de homens e mulheres numa natureza imensa e intacta, mas milhares de milhões num mundo descarnado e exaurido. (245)

[We're going back to being primitive hoarders . . . with the difference that we are not a few thousand men and women in an immense, unspoiled nature, but thousands of millions in an uprooted, exhausted world. (242)]

In this "exhausted world," old concepts no longer apply. The notion of time is lost to the blind. The doctor's wife is the only one perturbed by her inability to tell the time after having forgotten to wind her watch (90, 92). However, for the other inmates, the one event that punctuates their days is the arrival of food. Starvation becomes the instinct that moves them, enabling the thugs with their weapons to dictate the rules of who is deserving of food. Food will be handed out only if the women grant sexual

favors to the chosen armed few. Veloso argues that there is no difference between victim and victimizer, but the new order that emerges is organized around who has gone blind and who is yet to become blind and those who bear arms and those who don't.³⁰ Amid this disorder, one staple of the old world holds up, and that is the trading of the female body. We recall that the magistrate's dressing in the frock facilitated the abuse of his body. In a chain of abuse, the reader witnesses in *Blindness* how the ones oppressed by the soldiers in turn mistreat their fellow blind compatriots, emphasizing the tendency whereby the victim becomes the oppressor. Blindness has reduced the inmates to the lowest form of human life, mere animalistic continued existence. The barriers have been eroded.

When the group finally ventures out of the asylum following the fire, the doctor's wife describes a world more shocking than the one she witnessed on the inside. She tells the old man with the black patch that "não há diferença entre o fora e o dentro, entre o cá e o lá, entre os poucos e os muitos, entre o que vivemos e o que teremos de viver" (233) ["there's no difference between inside and outside, between here and there, between the many and the few, between what we're living through and what we shall have to live through" (229)]. On the outside, they see dogs and other blind people scavenging for food; a parallel is drawn between the animals and the once-human citizens. The dogs have retained their sight and have formed new packs. Other animals have also elected to form new packs "se defendem de ser caçados" (250) ["to defend themselves from being hunted down" (247)]. When the doctor's wife loses her direction in a city that has become unfamiliar, the dog of tears (so named because it had licked tears off her face) chooses to leave his pack and join her. The dog of tears "não anda ao cheiro de carne morta" (233) ["does not follow the scent of the dead" (229)] but instead "acompanha uns olhos que ele bem sabe estarem vivos" (233) ["accompanies a pair of eyes that he knows are alive and well" (229)]. In a twist of events, the dog of tears approximates the patterns of the other, having grown too close to human beings.

Once the order of the city has been disturbed, what is exposed is a disintegration of society that is either irreversible or destined to have lasting repercussions. (In *Ensaio sobre a lucidez* [2004] [*Seeing* (2004)], Saramago returns to the theme of blindness; in this novel the citizens have acquired insight and choose not to vote for the same authority, who remains ethically blind. The earlier becoming has forced on them a new reality, and refusing to vote could be seen as a manifestation of a new form of creativity that has given them some power.) On the outside, the doctor's wife sees other newly formed packs, like hers, searching for food amid the ruin of

the city. She describes them: “Mantêm-se juntos, apertados uns contra os outros, como um rebanho, nenhum deles quer ser a ovelha perdida porque de antemão sabem que nenhum pastor os irá procurar” (211) [“They stay together, pressed up against each other, like a flock, no one there wants to be the lost sheep, for they know that no shepherd will come looking for them” (206)]. What remains are subhumans with “os olhos mortos, como de vidro” (52) [“dead eyes, like glass” (43)], fighting for basic animal survival. Even in church, the wife notices how all the statues have been blindfolded with white bandages:

Não podia ser verdade o que os olhos Ihe mostravam, aquele homem pregado na cruz com uma venda branca a tapar-lhe os olhos, e ao lado uma mulher com o coração trespassado por sete espadas e os olhos também tapados por uma venda branca, e não eram só este homem e esta mulher que assim estavam, todas as imagens da igreja tinham os olhos vendados, as esculturas com um pano branco . . . as pinturas com uma grossa pincelada de tinta branca. (301)

[it could not be true what her eyes revealed, that man nailed to the cross with a white bandage covering his eyes, and next to him a woman, her heart pierced by seven swords and her eyes also covered with a white bandage, and it was not only that man and that woman who were in that condition, all the images in the church had their eyes covered, statues with a white cloth . . . paintings with a thick brushstroke of white paint. (300)]

Even religion is blind to the misery. The statues are mimicking the condition of the blind, for at this moment in time, the plight of the inmates appears to be that of the whole humanity. This sentiment is echoed by the doctor’s wife when she says that the “o mundo está todo aqui dentro” (102) [“the whole world is right here” (94)]. Removed from their familiar surroundings, their brutality as human beings is exposed. The movement from majoritarian to minoritarian is complete; in the asylum of the blind allegorically resides the whole of humanity stripped to a bare minimum, uncovering the bleakness of what it is to be human. The picture of humanity presented by Saramago is very gloomy: the only positive image is the comradeship that evolves between the members of the pact, which develops out of necessity and in answer to a becoming-animal brought about by a confrontation with a surreal illness. One variable has set in motion a deterritorialization, a becoming from the human to the animal. We had

only needed to scratch the surface. In the epigraph, Saramago quotes the *Book of Exhortations*, “Se podes olhar, vê. Se podes, ver, repara [“If you can see, look. If you can look, observe”]. Saramago asks those with vision to acknowledge the darkness that is within; failing this, everyone suffers from blindness. In Plato’s allegory of the cave, the unchained prisoner, who is allowed to walk from darkness to light, acquires wisdom. In *Blindness*, little is learned, as the inhabitants of the city seem not to be able to distinguish between the shadows on the wall and the reality outside.³¹ The doctor’s comment at the end suggests that they have been blind all along, blind people “que vêem, Cegos que, vendo, não vêem” (310) [“who can see, but do not see” (309)]. The blindness resides within them even though they have regained their ability to see.

Conclusion

Interrogating *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Blindness* using Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-animal,” I have shown how a single action, planned or otherwise, can produce a deterritorialization or a movement from majoritarian to minoritarian that cannot be reversed. “Becoming-animal” in both Coetzee and Saramago is essentially a negative process even though Deleuze and Guattari suggest that it can function as a source of creativity. Creativity here is thus a result of an uninvited becoming. In a becoming, as events in both novels demonstrate, a threshold is crossed and a state of affairs is challenged. A single event can disturb an established order and set in motion a process; in both *Blindness* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the pattern is one of degradation culminating in an irreversible deterritorialization of the being. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate regains a degree of insight as a result. In *Blindness*, although the characters regain their sight toward the end of the novel, the becoming-blind has at once eroded their perceived humanity and exposed the animal within. In a Deleuzian and Guattarian becoming, a reversal is impossible; thus, a return to the norms they once knew is not feasible. In both novels, the human beings have undergone a transformation, metamorphosing into a lower form of life. The beast within the human, which Agamben’s machine had exteriorized, is reinteriorized, exposing the animality within.

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Notes

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16. *Ibid.*, 199.
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18. José Saramago, *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, 1995), 97; José Saramago, *Blindness*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (London: Harvill Press, 1997), 89. Hereafter cited by page number.
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